

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 22, 2017
Second Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-14
I Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-41

In this episode today from John's Gospel, John twice identifies Jesus as the "Lamb of God." It is one of John's foremost ways of describing Jesus, not merely here in his Gospel, but also in the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation. In the Revelation, John refers to Jesus as the "Lamb of God" close to 28 times!

In John's Gospel, describing Jesus as the Lamb of God evokes images of the Jewish Passover, and Jesus is the Passover Lamb. This is why the apostle Paul will tell the Corinthians, "Christ our Passover [Lamb] is sacrificed for us."

In the Revelation, John describes Jesus as the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." Images of the Passover Lamb are present, but John expands the image to describe Jesus as the Sovereign Lord and the Judge of the world at the end of the age.

At any rate, John sees Jesus here and proclaims: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." This is an amazing affirmation. Little wonder then that the Church through the ages has sung and affirmed this in its worship for nearly two millennia. We affirm it every week in our worship here at Epworth. I'm referring, of course, to the *Agnus Dei*, which is Latin for, "Lamb of

God.” And each week we say these words as both an affirmation and a prayer: *O Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.*

Let’s look a bit more closely at this affirmation.

John says that Jesus comes to “take away” the sin of the world. That seems an interesting choice of words. It’s interesting to me that Jesus does not come to “forgive” the sin of the world, but *to take it away*. The taking away of something has the idea of *removing* it or destroying it, not merely overlooking it.

This made me think of the collect that we pray during the Advent season, which says: “O God, whose blessed Son came into the world *that he might destroy the works of the devil* and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life...”

The collect continues by asking for grace that we may become pure as Jesus is pure, so that we may be like him when he returns in power and great glory.

So when John says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, he is reminding us that God’s way of dealing with the problem of sin is not merely to *forgive it*, but to *take it away*.

In the Genesis narrative, God created a world that was good, a world that was pure and free from sin. A world marked by *harmony*, not just with individuals and God, but a harmony that permeated the entire cosmos.

The story takes many dramatic twists and turns, but by the time we get to the Revelation to St. John, we see that the original creation that has been marred by sin

is being *recreated* by God at tremendous cost, as the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, and the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world stands on the throne, under which is the blood of the martyrs and saints. John sees clearly the corrosive, divisive, and deadly results of sin. And he shows dramatically that God's response to sin (both individual and cosmic) is not partial or half-hearted. It is thoroughgoing. Jesus came not merely to forgive sin; he came to *take it away*.

So, the Lamb of God comes to *take away* sin. But not sin in the generic sense. John says that he comes to take away "the sin of the world." What does John mean by this?

For most of my life I have read this and understood it to mean the collective sins of all of us, of every person to ever walk the planet. Take all of my sins, and yours, and every other person who has ever lived, and add them all up. Jesus came to take those away. And I suppose that this is probably accurate. But could there be more involved?

Two things are worth noting here. First, John speaks here of *sin*, not *sins*. He uses the singular. And second, John uses the phrase "of the world." I would have thought he would have said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the people," or even, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away *my* sins" or *our* sins."

When John says “the sin of the world,” does he have something in mind in addition to all of our collective acts of disobedience?

Consider this. When Paul writes his letter to the church at Rome, he makes a provocative statement. He says:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him... [Romans 1:18-21, RSV]

Paul seems to say that the very existence of the world is enough for people to know God, because God reveals Himself through all that He has made. People should be able to discern God’s presence and to recognize God and to come to know God like the Psalmist did when he wrote: “The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands; day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge.” [Psalm 19:1-2, NIV]

Perhaps then the “sin of the world” is our refusal to see and acknowledge God’s presence in every nook and cranny of the world God has made. Our refusal to acknowledge God’s active presence with us, and to give thanks for it.

So if we won’t recognize and acknowledge God’s presence with us through what God has made, what does God do? He takes it to the next level. He takes on flesh and blood and bone, and in the person of Jesus Christ he shows us his

invisible nature, his deity, and his eternal power. He walks our streets. He shows up in our hospital rooms and at our gravesites. He sits beside us in those moments when we sit in a dark room with our heads in our hands, not knowing what comes next or how we will cope.

He comes to us. *But oh, how we struggle to recognize him. How we stubbornly refuse to acknowledge him.* The sin of the world is that he comes into the world, the world is made through him, *yet the world knows him not.*

Is there Good News for us today? How might we know him? How might we recognize his presence in the nooks and crannies of our lives?

Remember the two followers of Jesus who were walking to the village of Emmaeus from Jerusalem after Jesus' death? Jesus joins them on their journey. He opens the Scriptures to them. But when is it that their eyes are fully opened? When do they recognize him fully?

When he breaks the bread in their presence.

As we come to the Lord's Table, I remind you that the bread and the wine are not mere symbols. They point to and participate in something beyond themselves. By faith they help you to *know* him, to *recognize him*, to acknowledge his presence with you and within this world that is ruptured by sin.

So come with faith. Come prayerfully, that you might *recognize* him here in these moments. Surrender again to him your heart, your life, your past, your

present, your future, the things you understand, and the things you don't. And give him thanks, most of all for his unfathomable mercy.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.